

# Epocrates Essentials App Review for the iPhone – Does the legendary medical app live up to the hype?

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The first app I downloaded on my iPhone was Epocrates. I didn't think twice about it, and in a way I assumed it was my obligation to do so before I saw patients in the hospital. Such high regard for this medical app elicits thoughts of a deep history, but it really burst onto the scene in the late 90s on the classic palm PDA platform. Epocrates quickly gained market share because it offered key functions for free, unlike its competitors. This tactic of offering some functionality for free has not changed over the years.

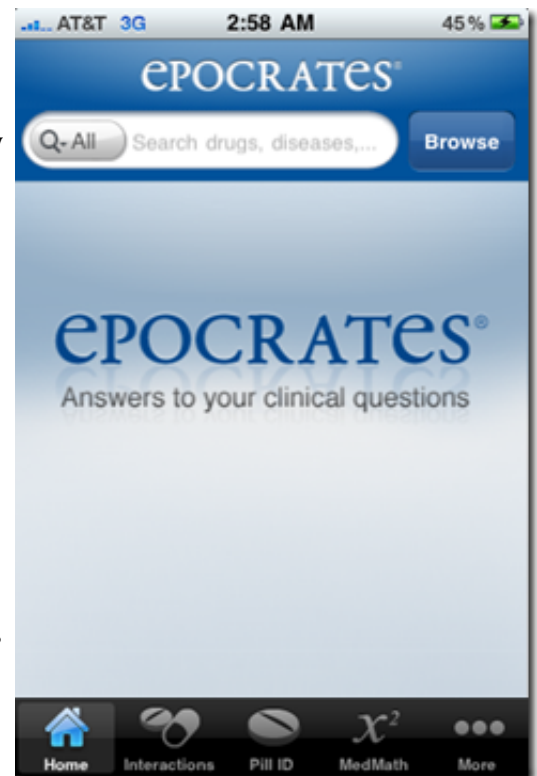
Unlike its arrival to the Palm PDA platform, Epocrates is considered the first medical application for the iPhone and iPod Touch platforms. The free version of the application is one of the most heavily downloaded medical apps in the App Store.

There are four different versions of Epocrates you can have on your iPhone or iPod Touch. Each version offers different features and subscription fees. The default application in the App Store is free, but in order to get the premium versions you can upgrade either online or through the app.

- Epocrates Rx (Free)
- Epocrates Rx Pro (\$99 per year)
- Epocrates Essentials (\$159 per year)
- Epocrates Essentials Deluxe (\$199 per year)

In this article, I'll review Epocrates – *Essentials*, the second premium level offered, and also go through the key features offered in each level of subscription. This is the largest medical app we've reviewed to date, content wise – so there will be lots of pictures!

**Navigation:**



When the application is opened to the home page you're presented with quick hitting health care facts, summarized literature, or suggestions on how to optimize your Epocrates experience. From here you're given the option to select the tabs on the bottom, "interactions", "Pill ID", "MedMath", and "More".

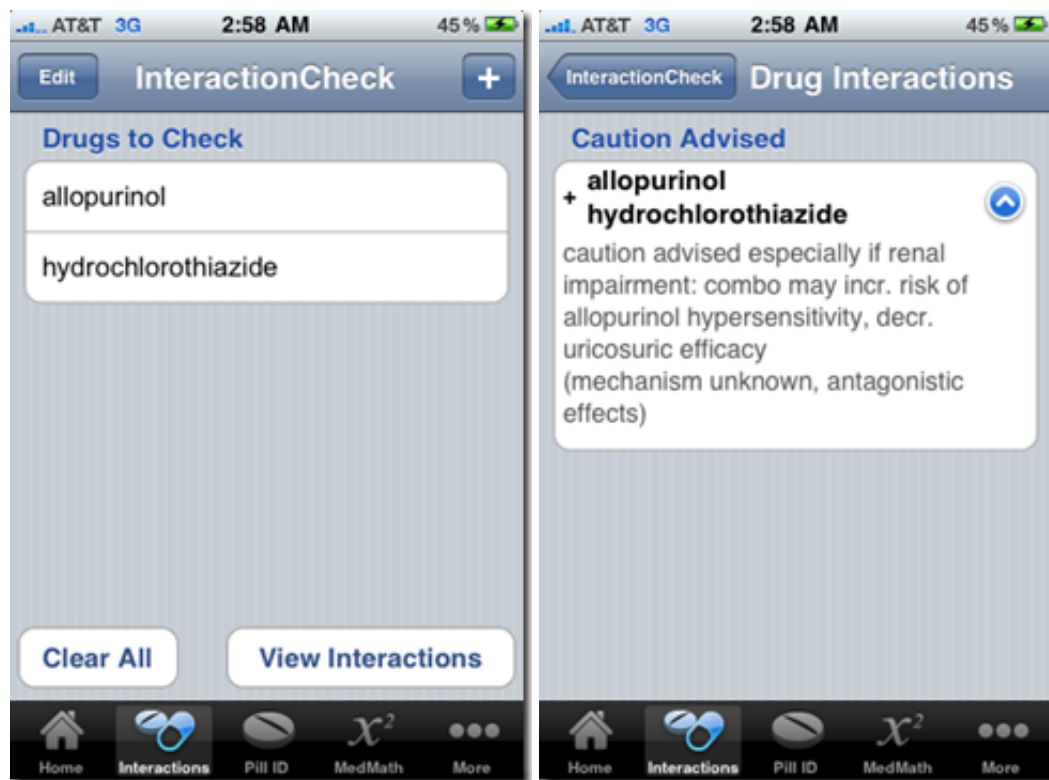
On the home screen, there is a comprehensive search button where you can search in Diseases (Dx), Drugs (Rx), Infectious Diseases (ID), Lab Tests (Lab), Resource Centers (RC), and Tables (Tbl). Most of these sections of search will only yield readable results if you have the premium versions of the app

The application is definitely quick, and the user interface is extremely clean and easy to use.

In this article, I'm starting from the most basic version of Epocrates available to the most premium version – the more premium versions contain all the features mentioned in the less expensive versions, along with extra features

#### Epocrates Rx – Free Version – Key Features:

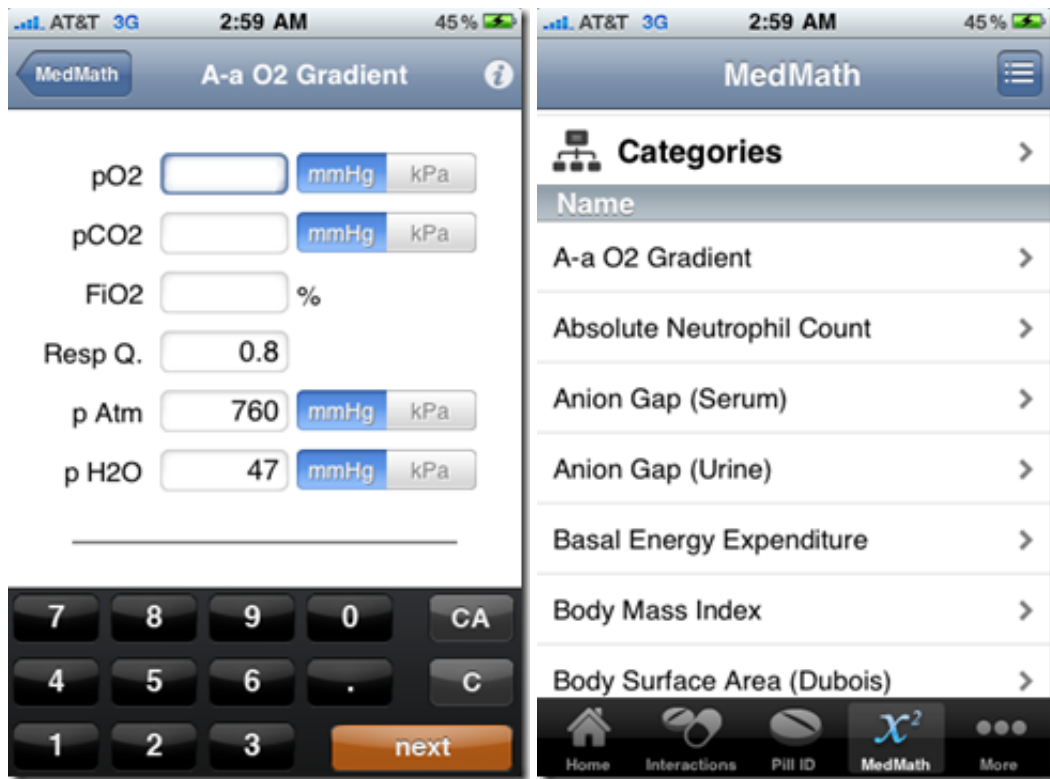
- Drug Interactions – This features is one of the most popular offered by Epocrates and is a crucial tool used by health care providers at the point of care. Very useful with geriatric patients who can be on multiple drug cocktails at one time.



- Pill Identifier – Pill pictures: One of the coolest features offered by Epocrates. This feature was getting huge amounts of hype when the first iPhone 2G was released. My own peers in the medical field were contemplating getting an iPhone for this innovative feature alone – they didn't – but that's the type of excitement it generated.

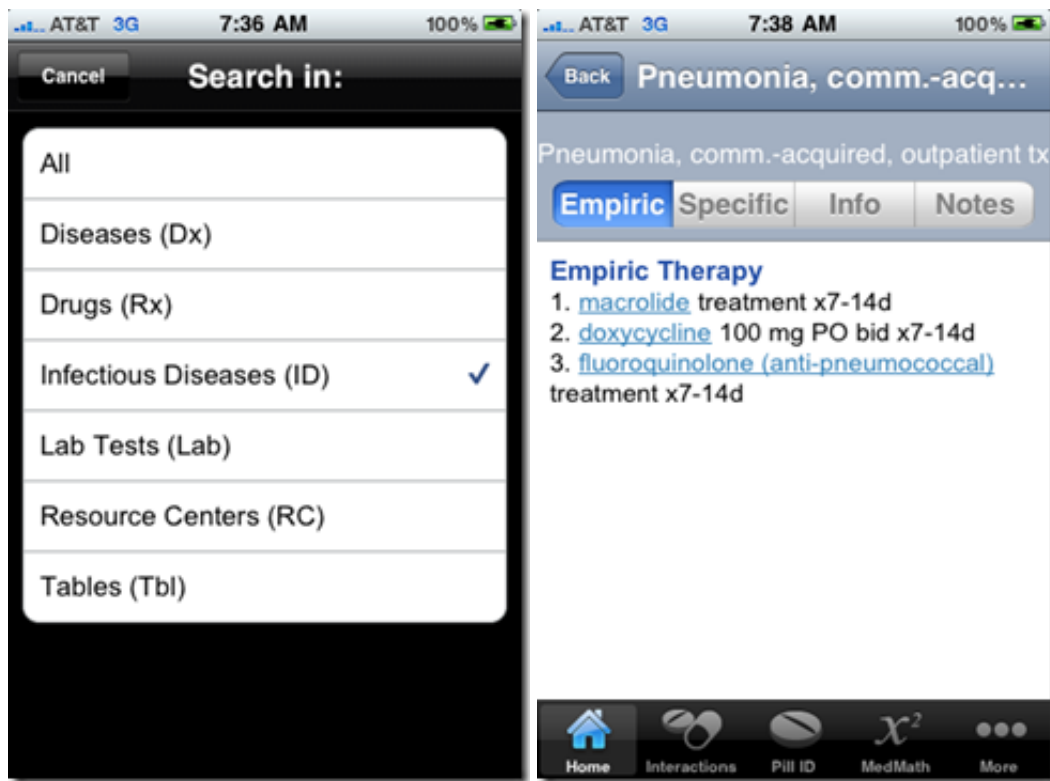


- Drug Info – Information on thousands of drugs. This includes mechanism of action, pharmacology, drug pricing, ability to add custom notes, and all the other basic drug info you could possibly want.
- MedMath – When the free version of Epocrates first rolled out this feature was lacking in functionality. [We've reviewed](#) other medical calculators, and although this portion of the app does not contain the same volume of equations as other calculators, the equations it does have are more than satisfactory. Some key equations I've found useful are the dosing calculator, Osmolarity, and the Parkland Burn formula. There's even a formula for number needed to treat!

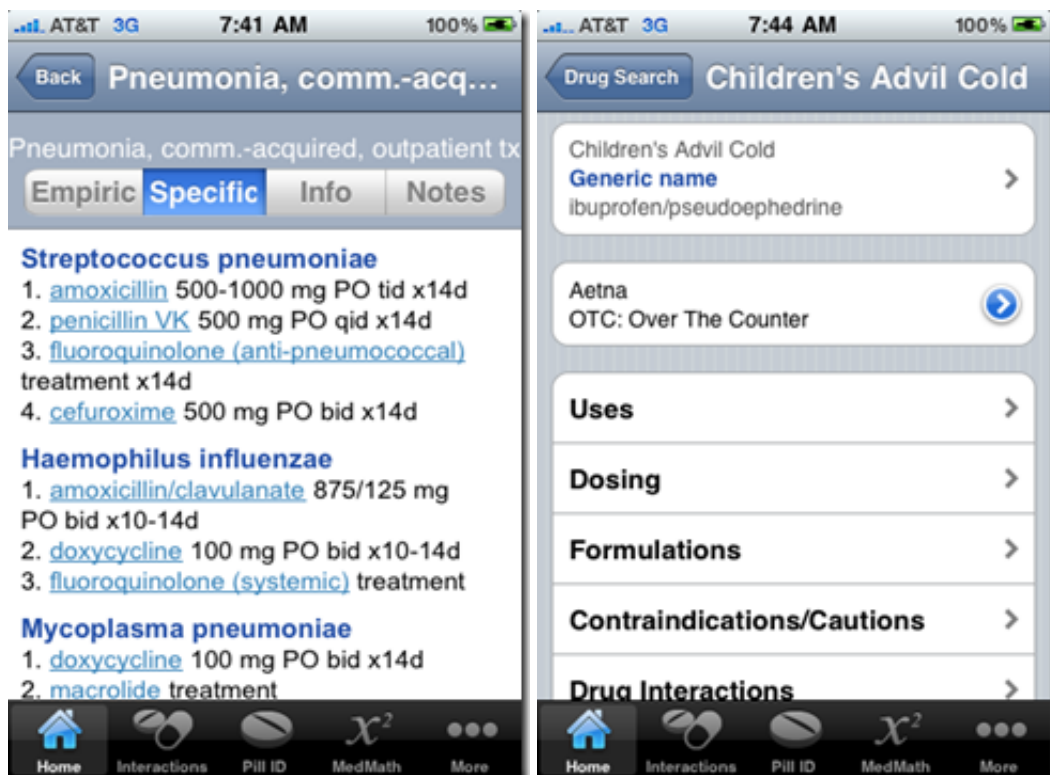


**Epocrates Rx Pro – \$99 per year – Key Features:**

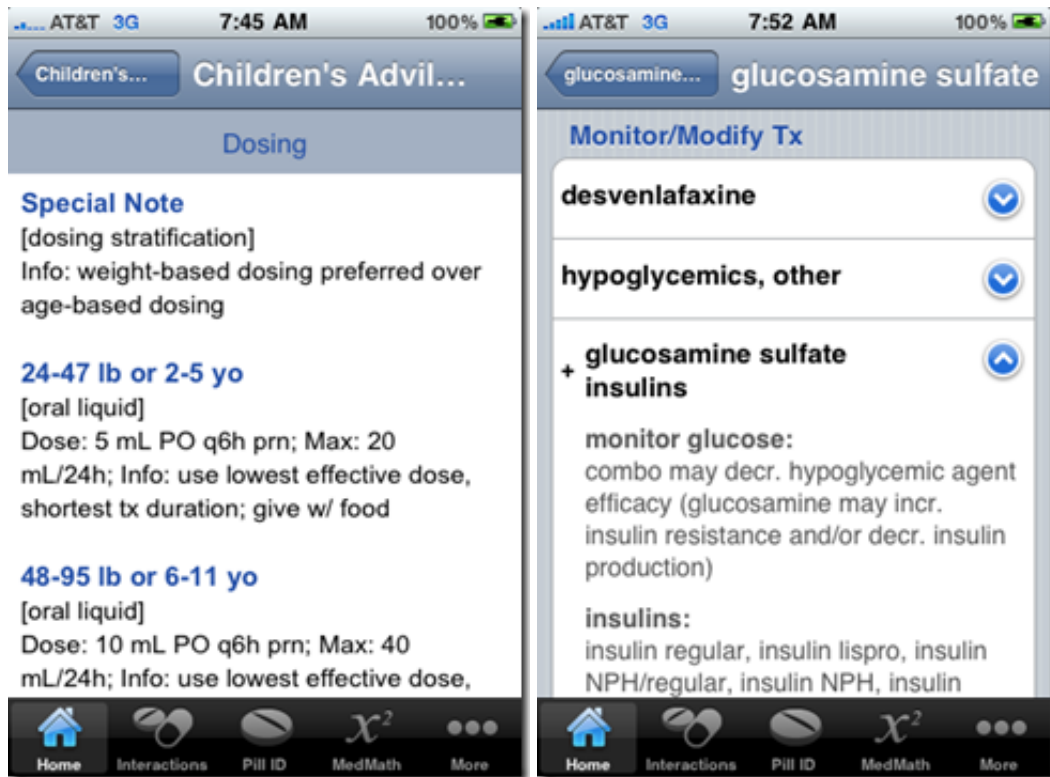
- Includes all the above features PLUS:
- Infectious Disease Treatment Guide – Basically, this enables the ID section on the search function. In the example I use, when you search for pneumonia, you're given the most common presentations. Once you select the applicable pathology you are given empiric and specific drug regimes. The specific regimes are organized by the particular pathogen. There is also an info tab, containing some brief information, and an area to add your own custom notes.



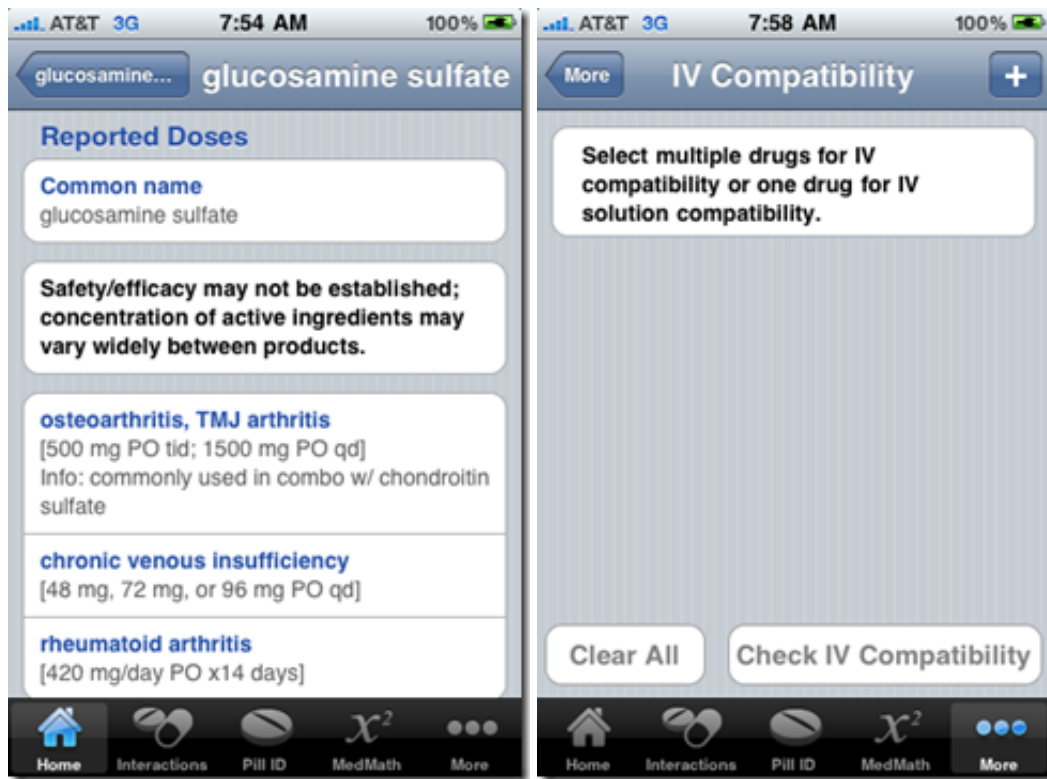
- Brand Name OTC drug products – This section allows you to quickly look up over the counter drugs, and provides basically the same information you see with prescription drugs. In the screen shots I took of Children’s Advil Cold, you can see how this functionality can be useful in reminding parents the dosing for their kids.



- Alternative Medicines – Complementary and Alternative medicines are added in this version. In the searches I did, these medicines did not contain the same wealth of knowledge as other drugs. Obviously, part of this can be attributed to the lack of hard literature on some of these medicines.

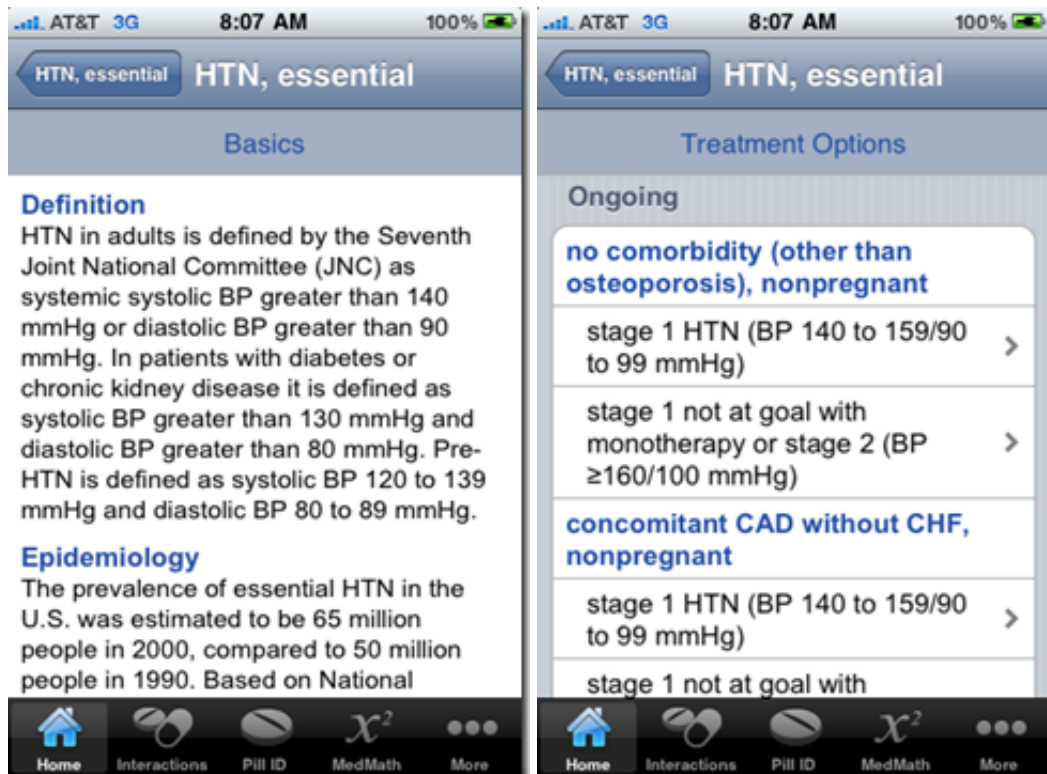


- IV compatibility checker – The IV compatibility checker is found in the “More” tab, and has a similar navigation as the drug interactions checker.

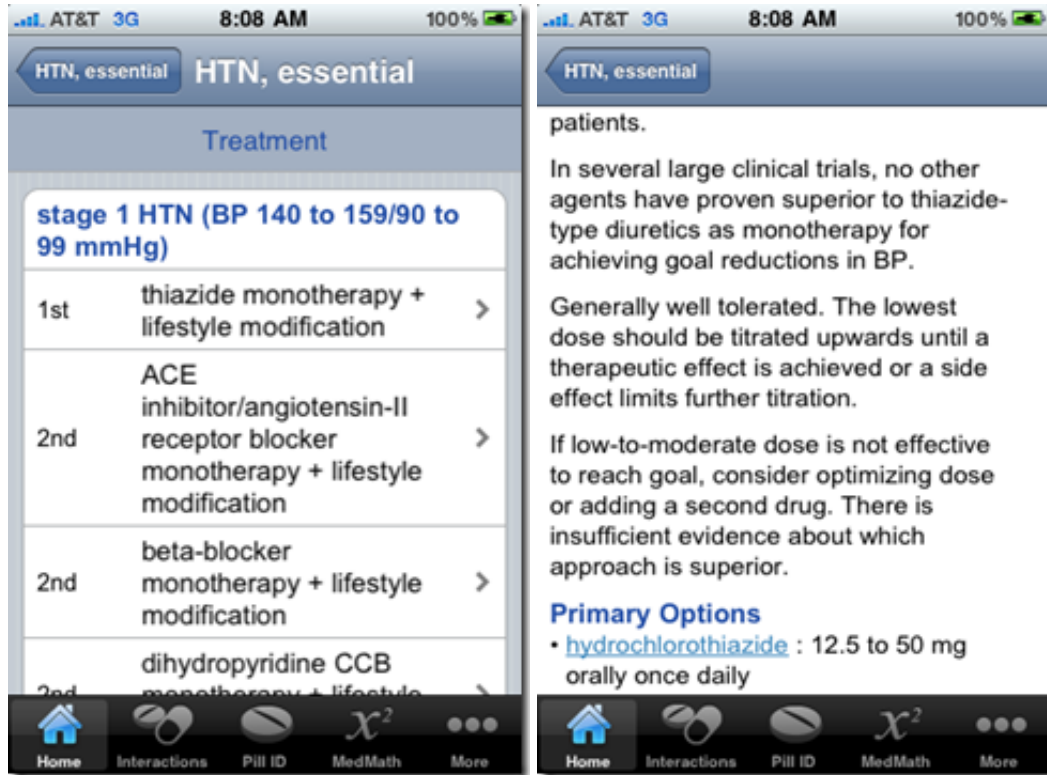


**Epocrates Essentials – \$159 per year – Key Features:**

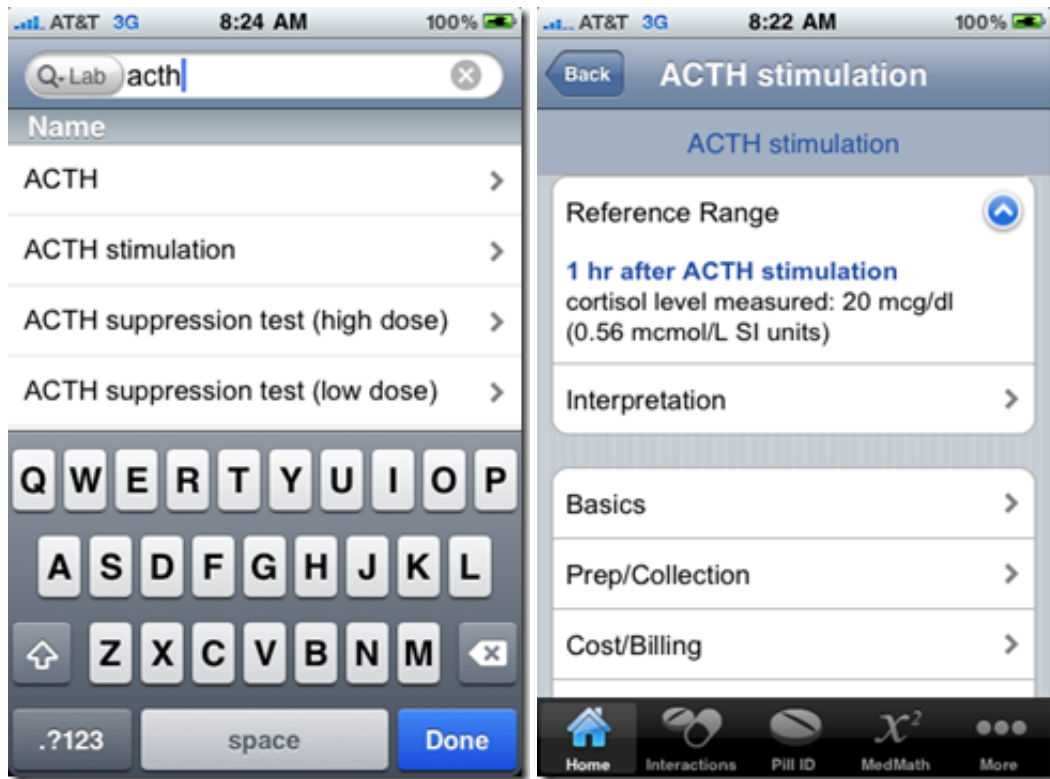
- Includes all of the above features PLUS:
- Disease Monographs – Pertinent information about the pathology in question, along with diagnosing and treatment options. In this example, I used hypertension.



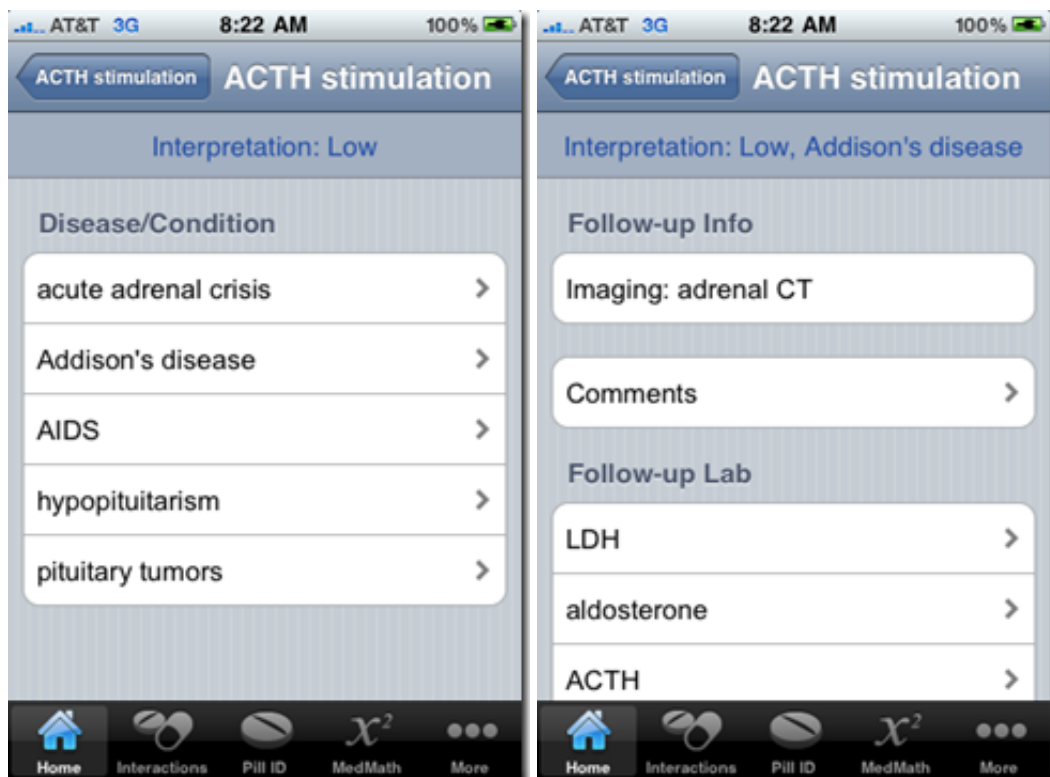
- Per Epocrates, the information is peer-reviewed in collaboration with the British Medical Journal. From what I read, information was up to date with current guidelines. The correct JNC protocol was mentioned, with proper anti-hypertensive drug combination treatments.



- High Resolution disease images – This section is useful for dermatology conditions, but many pathologies don't contain pictures and if they do, only a few are provided. Also, images are pulled from an outside server, and if you don't have a dedicated internet connection you won't be able to access them.

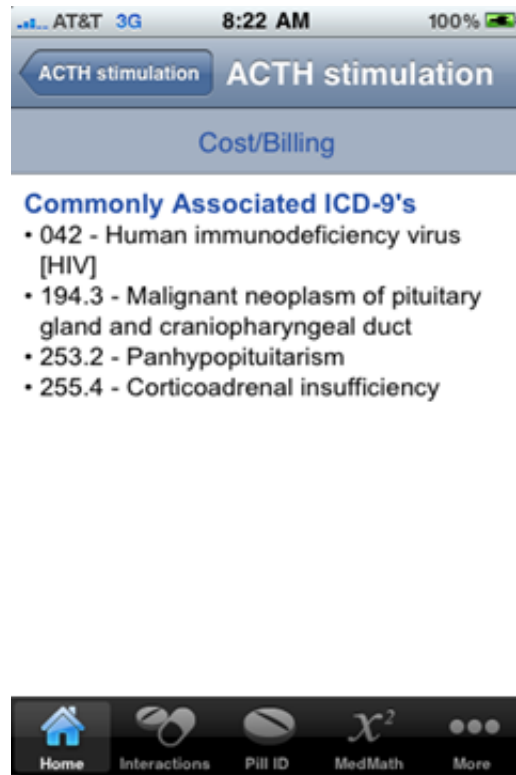


- Hundreds of diagnostic and laboratory tests – [We've reviewed](#) other medical lab test applications in the App Store – but this portion of Epocrates is at a completely different level than anything we reviewed. In this example I use the ACTH stimulation test. Along with the obvious reference range, I'm given an interpretation with possibly pathologies, and also follow up tests to order if I suspect a particular pathology. ICD-9 billing codes are listed at the end



## Epocrates Essentials Deluxe – \$199 per year – Key Features:

- Includes all the above features PLUS:
- ICD-9 codes and CPT codes – I don't have the Deluxe version of this application so can't accurately comment on this. Per the Epocrates website, you can look up more than 20,000 of these medical billing codes. The search function allows you to find codes based on diagnosis, procedure, or by category. The below picture is from the billing codes provided in the Lab Section. In the Essentials Deluxe version these codes can be searched directly.

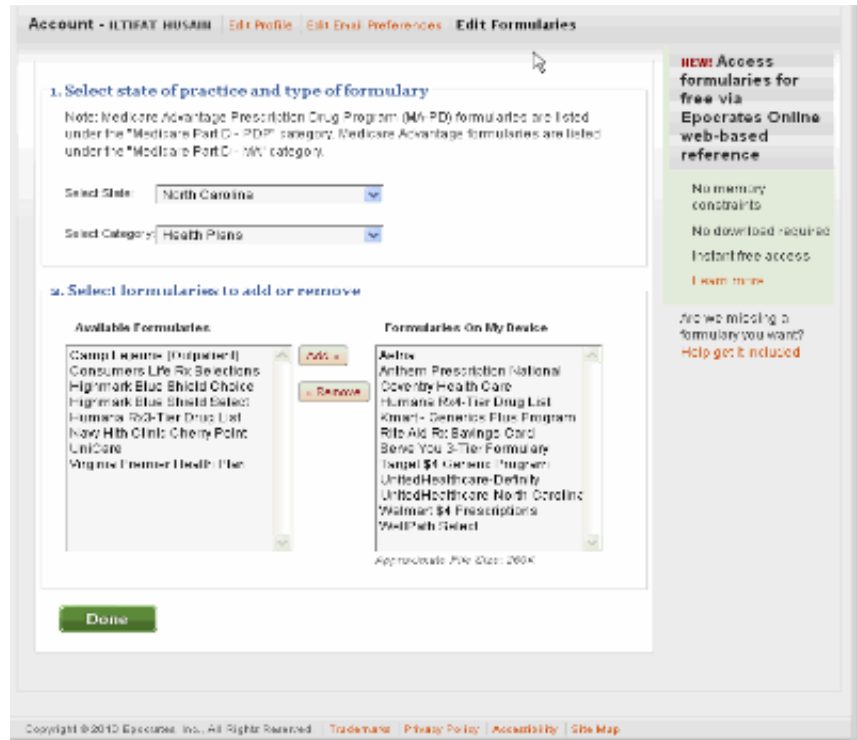


- Medical Dictionary – This dictionary comes from Stedman's Medical Dictionary

## What I liked:

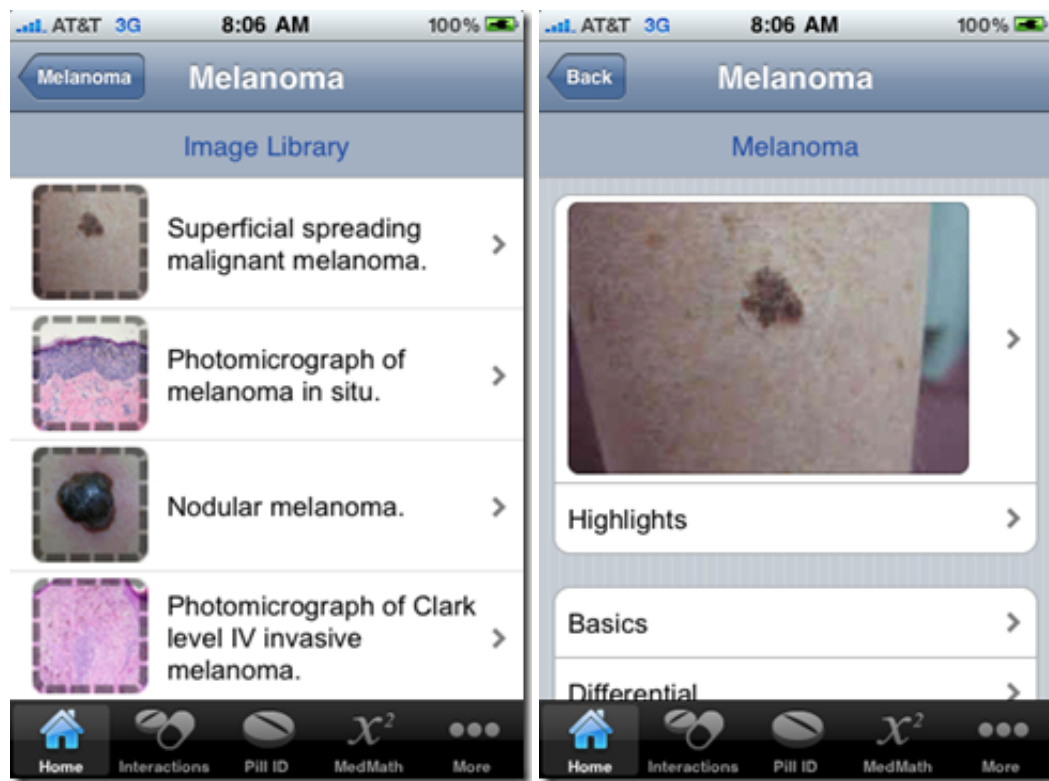
- Massive amount of information from a reputed source in the mobile medical field.
- Epocrates Rx version – contains a great set of tools for free – Drug Interactions, Pill Identifier, Drug Info, MedMath.
- Overall User Interface is clean and quick, allowing you to quickly look up information at the point of care.
- ID treatment guide contains succinct information on treatment options.
- Disease Monographs contain evidence based data, along with references. Contain linear information, allowing you to formulate a differential, helping you diagnose, and then giving treatment options.
- Diagnostic and Laboratory Tests: Contains a massive amount of information, aiding you in your differential diagnosis, and offering pertinent follow up studies to confirm or eliminate suspected differentials.

- You have the ability to login to your account online and edit the formularies by State and particular insurance. The next time Epocrates loads on your iPhone, your new formularies load as well. You can even add \$4 Walmart prescriptions! Below is a screen clipping from the webpage that allows you to edit formularies.



### What I didn't like so much, and what could be improved upon:

- A minor user interface gripe – If in search mode, and you make your selection, when you tap “back” you lose what you typed in.
- Although search feature was robust, some sort of “did you mean” feature, akin to what Google tells you when you spell something wrong would be nice. Abbreviations need to be recognized as well. When I type in HCTZ, nothing shows up until I type out hydrochlorothiazide.
- High resolution pictures – only available if you have a dedicated internet connection. Since pictures are being pulled from an outside server, it would have been nice to see more of them. Melanoma topic has only 6 pictures – and two of them are pathology slides.



- Alternative medicine section is a nice touch, and definitely needed since their use among patients is increasing. But it would have been nice to have some brief literature connected to those medications. There are many studies in progress right now and some that just finished up that could help with clinical decision making when it comes to alternative/complementary medicine use. Also, Many of my Hispanic patients are the ones using these medicines, this might be a stretch – but it would have been great if the alternative medicines were available in Spanish as well.

## Conclusion:

This exhaustive review shows why Epocrates is considered the top mobile medical application, and arguably the best iPhone medical application. This medical app has a great decision support system and has grown to include more evidence based data, at times rivaling UpToDate.

Epocrates gives health care providers four versions of its medical suite with 4 distinct price points. For medical students and PA students, you should consult your school to see if any discounts are offered. Otherwise, if you're cash strapped, as most are, staying with the free version should be okay for you.

However, if you're a resident, PA, or physician then the premium versions of Epocrates are a must. Deciding between the three premium versions is difficult, but I'd recommend the Epocrates *Essentials* version. The Disease monographs and Lab tests section alone are worth the extra \$60 a year. The Epocrates *Essentials Deluxe* version costs \$40 more a year and includes billing codes (ICD-9/CPT) and a medical dictionary. If you don't have an automated billing system via electronic medical records, than the *Deluxe* version might be a good buy, otherwise I'd stick with Epocrates *Essentials*.

Although I've talked in detail about the features and contents provided in the premium versions of Epocrates, I can't overstate the overall user experience with this app. Many medical reference apps

have tried to emulate the content provided by Epocrates, and have succeeded, but Epocrates wins with its robust user interface and navigation – making it a breeze to use quickly when making point of care decisions.

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**tom** 1 month ago

the ability to customize formularies seems like a really nice touch, didn't even know you could do this. will definitely customize my list now

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**Iltifat Husain** 1 month ago

Tom, that level of customization is definitely a plus, and as you can see from the screen shot I included, there are a lot of formularies, broken down by your location, that you can select. For me, the wal-mart list is the most useful.

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